

Remarks at the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast

June 19, 2009

The President. Thank you. *Buenos dias.*

Audience members. *Buenos dias.*

The President. It is good to see everybody here. Just a few quick acknowledgments. Our outstanding Secretary of Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, is here. Please give her a big round of applause; the great Governor of the State of Pennsylvania, Ed Rendell. Two special members of my staff that I want all of you to get to know. First of all, we have a White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, if you haven't already met him, Joshua DuBois is just a wonderful young man. Please give him a big round of applause. He helps to organize a lot of our faith outreach. And our Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, one of my favorite people, Cecilia Munoz, please give her a big round of applause.

I want to thank Reverend Cortes for the wonderful introduction and the wonderful prayer for me and my family. I want to thank Esperanza and all of you who worked so hard to put together the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast and Conference. And I also want to join you in honoring the work of Adolfo Carrión, Sr., on this Father's Day weekend. On this Father's Day weekend I know that my Director of Urban Affairs, Adolfo's son, is particularly proud of his dad. I also want to thank all of you for the work that you do each and every day. Through your service to your communities, you represent the very best in our country. And I'm honored to join you in prayer this morning.

At a time when there's no shortage of challenges to occupy our time, it's even more important to step back and to give thanks and to seek guidance from each other, but most importantly from God. That's what we've come here to do.

We can begin by giving thanks for the legacy that allows us to come together, for it was the genius of America's Founders to protect the freedom of all religion and those who practice no religion at all. So as we join in prayer, we remember that this is a nation of Christians

and Muslims and Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers. It is this freedom that allows faith to flourish within our borders. It is this freedom that makes our Nation stronger.

For those of us who draw on faith as a guiding force in our lives, prayer has many purposes. For many, it's a source of support when times are hard. President Lincoln, who Reverend Cortes mentioned, once said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." And while the challenges that I've faced pale in comparison to Lincoln's, I know that more than once I've been filled with the same conviction over the last 5 months.

But prayer is more than a last resort. Prayer helps us search for meaning in our own lives, and it helps us find the vision and the strength to see the world that we want to build. And that's what I'd like to talk about for just a few minutes today.

As I look out at this audience, I'm reminded of the power of faith in America; faith in God, and a faith in the promise of this great country. Each of us come from many different places. We trace our roots back to different nations, and we represent a broad spectrum of personal and political beliefs. But all of us pray to God. All of us share a determination to build a better future for our children and for our grandchildren. That must be a starting point for common ground and for the America that we want to build.

Like some of you, I am the son of a parent who came to these shores in search of a better future. And while I may be the first African American President, there is nothing unique or unusual about the opportunities that this country gave to me. Instead, like generations of Americans, I could count on the basic promise that no matter what you look like or where you come from, America will let you go as far as your dreams and your hard work will carry you.

And that promise is at the heart of the American story. It's a story shared by many of you: by clergy and Members of Congress; by

business leaders and community organizers. It's a story of every young child who has the opportunity to go farther in life than their parents were able to go. It's the story of a young girl who could rise from a public housing project to be nominated for the highest court in the land. And I am confident that it's a story that will someday be told by the first Hispanic President of the United States of America.

But we know there is much more work to be done to extend the promise of a better life to all our children and grandchildren. In all that we do, we must be guided by that simple command that binds all great religions together: Love thy neighbor as thyself.

In the 21st century, we've learned that this truth is central not just to our own lives, but to our success as a nation. If our children cannot get the world-class education they need to succeed, then America will not be able to compete with other countries. If our families cannot afford health care, then the costs go up for all of us: individuals, businesses, and government. If folks down the street can't pay their mortgage and folks across town can't find a job, then that pain is going to trickle into other parts of our economy.

And that's why we've come together on behalf of the future that we want to build, one where all of our children go to the best schools, all our people can go to work and make a living, all our families can afford health care, and prosperity is extended to everybody. Together we must build a future where the promise of America is kept for a new generation.

We also know that keeping this promise means upholding America's tradition as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. Those things aren't contradictory; they're complementary. That's why I'm committed to passing comprehensive immigration reform as President of the United States.

The American people believe in immigration, but they also believe that we can't tolerate a situation where people come to the United States in violation of the law, nor can we tolerate employers who exploit undocumented workers in order to drive down wages. That's why we're taking steps to strengthen border security, and we must build on those efforts. We

must also clarify the status of millions who are here illegally, many who have put down roots. For those who wish to become citizens, we should require them to pay a penalty and pay taxes, learn English, go to the back of the line behind those who played by the rules. That is the fair, practical, and promising way forward, and that's what I'm committed to passing as President of the United States.

We must never forget that time and again, the promise of America has been renewed by immigrants who make their story part of the American story. We see it in every State of our country. We see it in our families and in our neighborhoods. And as President, I've been honored to see it demonstrated by the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States.

You know, last month, I had the honor of welcoming a group of our servicemembers as citizens for the very first time. In that crowd, there were faces from every corner of the world. And one man from Nicaragua, Jeonathan Zapata, had waited his whole life to serve our country even though he was not yet a citizen. "By serving in the military," he said, "I can also give back to the United States." He's done so in Afghanistan, and he even helped man the 400,000th aircraft landing aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk*.

And Jeonathan's story is not unique either. He's part of a proud legacy of service. For generations, Hispanic Americans have served with great commitment and valor, and there are now nearly 150,000 Hispanic Americans serving under our flag. And today we are proud to welcome several of them who are wounded warriors recovering at Walter Reed. Please join me in honoring their service and in keeping them and all of our troops in our thoughts and prayers—please.

These troops have dedicated their lives to serving their fellow Americans. And their example, like those of all of our men and women in uniform, should challenge us to ask what we can do to better serve our communities and our country, because the greatest responsibility that we have as citizens is to one another.

That's the spirit we need to build; that's the America that we seek. And to do so, we must

look past our divisions to serve the hopes and dreams that we hold in common. We must give life to that fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, that I am my sister's keeper.

Scripture tells us, "The word is very near to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." Today let us pray for the strength to find the word in our hearts and for the vision to see the America that we can build together as one nation and as one people.

Thank you for your partnership. Thank you for your prayers. May God bless all of you, and may God bless the United States of America.

Remarks to Participants of the Year Up Center in Arlington, Virginia June 19, 2009

The President. How is everybody doing today?

Audience members. Good.

The President. Doing good?

Audience members. Yes.

The President. Well, it is good to see you—it is impressive. First of all, I want to thank Gerald for founding this extraordinary program. Give him a big round of applause. And I want to thank Tynesia for running this thing in an extraordinary way. It seems like she's doing a great job. Give her a big round of applause.

So I am just very excited to be here. I just met four of your fellow Year Up participants, and they represented you very well. And they told me a little bit about the program.

I know that so many of you are doing extraordinary things now, but you've had your bumps in the road, and there have been some tough times. And part of the reason we wanted to come here is that Father's Day is coming up, and a lot of young people in America these days are growing up without fathers in the house, and as a consequence, without direction. And I'm somebody who didn't have a father in my house when I was coming up. And what we wanted to do was to highlight the fact that, first of all, there are all kinds of people who succeed despite the obstacles, but also to remind ourselves that there's so much talent out there that is untapped because people

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:32 a.m. at the J.W. Marriott hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Joshua DuBois, Director, White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; Rev. Luis Cortes, Jr., founder and president, Esperanza; Adolfo Carrion, Jr., Director, White House Office of Urban Affairs; Supreme Court Associate Justice-designate Sonia Sotomayor; and PO 3d Class Jeonathan E. Zapata, USN.

don't have pathways to success, and they don't have somebody who is giving them a hand and giving them advice and giving them counsel.

And so, number one, we want to send out a message that our parents—that's the first foundation—and fathers especially need to be involved with their children's lives. So the young men who are here today, I just want you to know that even if your father was not there, you can be there for your child when you have a child—and it's not a bad thing to wait to have a child—[laughter]—until you've got your act together.

But the second message was also to say that we as a community can help provide young people with support and direction. And I think that this Year Up program is a terrific example of that.

So I just want to thank all of you for being great model—role models for your peers and for younger people who are coming up; your brothers and sisters, people in the community, they're all watching you. I want to remind you that things are going to get tough at times in your lives, and I don't want anybody here to feel discouraged. Right now the economy is going through a very tough time, which means that the job market is more restrictive, especially for young people entering the market. But the skills that you've obtained and the poise, character that you've been developing is